The Need for Interpretation: A Biblical and Theological Critique of Uninterpreted Tongues in Worship

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August 15, 2024

The practice of speaking in tongues is a powerful and often divisive element of Christian worship, especially within Pentecostal and Charismatic traditions. Rooted in the New Testament, glossolalia is considered by many to be a direct expression of the Holy Spirit's presence. However, the issue of speaking in tongues without interpretation presents significant theological and practical challenges to the cohesion and edification of the church. This paper seeks to explore the biblical foundations for the practice of tongues, with particular emphasis on Paul's teachings in **1 Corinthians 14**, which mandates interpretation for the edification of the church body. Through theological analysis and examination of real-world church practices, we will argue that returning to these biblical principles can ensure that worship remains both Spirit-led and accessible to all congregants. Our goal is to provide church leaders and congregants with a balanced approach that honors personal spiritual expression while maintaining the order and unity essential to corporate worship.

Keywords: speaking in tongues, glossolalia, 1 Corinthians 14, interpretation of tongues, Pentecostalism, Charismatic worship, biblical theology, church unity, spiritual gifts, corporate worship.

Introduction

Introduction to the Practice of Speaking in Tongues

Speaking in tongues, or glossolalia, is a spiritual gift described in the New Testament, primarily associated with the early church's experience during the Pentecost as described in **Acts 2:1-4**. During this event, the Holy Spirit filled the apostles, enabling them to speak in other languages, understood by the diverse crowd present. The practice of speaking in tongues, however, has evolved in various Christian traditions to include not only known human languages but also what is often referred to as "heavenly" or "angelic" tongues, a form of speech that is unintelligible to both speaker and listener without divine interpretation.

In Christian theology, tongues serve as a sign of the presence of the Holy Spirit and are considered a direct form of communication with God. While some traditions view tongues as primarily for personal edification, others see it as a spiritual practice meant to benefit the entire church body when accompanied by interpretation. The Apostle Paul, in his letter to the Corinthians, addressed the proper use of tongues in worship, stressing the need for order and clarity so that the whole congregation may be edified.

Overview of the Issue of Uninterpreted Tongues in Modern Worship

In modern worship, particularly within Pentecostal and Charismatic movements, speaking in tongues often occurs spontaneously during services. While this practice is embraced as a powerful manifestation of the Holy Spirit, a recurring issue is the prevalence of tongues being spoken without interpretation. This lack of interpretation can lead to confusion, distraction, and even division within the congregation. When tongues are spoken without any understanding of their meaning, the purpose of the gift—to edify the church—may be lost. Worshipers unfamiliar with the practice or those expecting clear spiritual teaching may feel alienated, leading to a breakdown in the collective experience of worship.

Uninterpreted tongues can raise significant theological and practical concerns. The Apostle Paul explicitly warned against the misuse of tongues in corporate worship in **1 Corinthians 14**, emphasizing that when the church gathers, the focus should be on mutual edification, understanding, and clarity. Despite this scriptural guidance, many contemporary churches allow or even encourage the practice of

uninterpreted tongues during worship services, creating an environment that might not align with Paul's instructions for orderly worship. This phenomenon raises questions about how to balance spiritual spontaneity with the scriptural call for interpretation.

Statement of Position: The Need for Interpretation Based on Scripture

As a believer attending a church that permits the practice of uninterpreted tongues, I find myself deeply concerned about its impact on the worship experience. Scripture clearly states the importance of interpretation when tongues are spoken in a communal setting. In **1 Corinthians 14:27-28**, Paul outlines the necessity of interpretation for tongues, explaining that without it, the speaker should remain silent in the church and speak only to themselves and God. This teaching reflects the broader biblical principle that spiritual gifts are given for the edification of the entire church, not just the individual.

I take the position that allowing uninterpreted tongues during worship not only disregards Paul's explicit instruction but also risks creating disorder and confusion within the church. Worship should be a time of unity, where the congregation collectively encounters God through clear and meaningful expressions of faith. Without interpretation, tongues serve only the individual speaker, leaving the rest of the congregation disconnected and potentially leading to a sense of exclusion. Thus, I believe that churches should return to a more biblically grounded practice that honors the need for interpretation, ensuring that the use of tongues enhances rather than detracts from the communal worship experience.

Biblical Foundation

1 Corinthians 14:27-28 as the Central Text

The key biblical passage for understanding the practice of speaking in tongues in worship is found in **1 Corinthians 14:27-28**:

"If anyone speaks in a tongue, two—or at the most three—should speak, one at a time, and someone must interpret. If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in the church and speak to himself and to God."

These verses provide explicit instructions regarding the practice of speaking in tongues in a communal setting, emphasizing that tongues should not be spoken unless there is someone present to interpret. The necessity of interpretation suggests that Paul viewed the act of speaking in tongues not simply as an expression of personal spirituality but as a potential means of edifying the entire congregation—if and only if its meaning could be understood.

The context of these verses is Paul's broader argument in **1 Corinthians 14** regarding the need for order and understanding in worship. Paul contrasts speaking in tongues with the gift of prophecy, which is readily understood by others and thus more directly beneficial to the congregation. He insists that all spiritual gifts should contribute to the edification of the church. When tongues are spoken without interpretation, they fail to achieve this goal and instead create confusion, which Paul strongly discouraged.

Exegetical Analysis: Context in Paul's Letters, Purpose, and Emphasis on Order and Understanding in Worship

In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul was addressing a church that had become overly enamored with the more ecstatic and spectacular gifts of the Spirit, particularly speaking in tongues. The Corinthians seemed to prioritize the more outwardly impressive gifts, sometimes to the detriment of the congregation's overall well-being. Paul's message in **1 Corinthians 14** is a corrective, guiding the church toward a more balanced and orderly use of spiritual gifts.

Paul's emphasis on order in worship can be seen throughout **1 Corinthians 14**. In verses 6-9, he underscores that speaking in tongues without interpretation is like speaking into the air; it is of no value to others because it cannot be understood. He uses the metaphor of musical instruments to make his point: just as instruments must play distinct notes to produce a melody, so too must the use of tongues be understandable to edify the church. In verses 19-20, Paul states his preference for speaking five intelligible words to instruct others over ten thousand words in a tongue that no one understands.

The purpose of this teaching was to help the Corinthians maintain an orderly and constructive worship experience. Paul feared that if unbelievers or those unlearned in the faith entered the church and heard a cacophony of uninterpreted tongues, they would think the congregation was mad (1

Corinthians 14:23). Thus, the overarching purpose of Paul's instruction was to ensure that worship was intelligible and beneficial for all present, rather than just a few individuals experiencing spiritual ecstasy.

Examination of Other New Testament References to Speaking in Tongues

The practice of speaking in tongues is mentioned in several other places in the New Testament, each offering additional context for its role in early Christian worship:

1. **Acts 2:1-4**: The first and most famous instance of speaking in tongues occurs during the day of Pentecost. Here, the apostles are filled with the Holy Spirit and begin to speak in other tongues. However, unlike the tongues described in **1 Corinthians**, these are immediately understood by the diverse crowd, each hearing the apostles speak in their own language. This event serves as a powerful sign of the Spirit's work in breaking down linguistic and cultural barriers. Notably, the tongues at Pentecost were intelligible to others without the need for interpretation because they were known languages.
2. **Mark 16:17**: In the longer ending of Mark's Gospel, Jesus tells his disciples that speaking in tongues will be one of the signs that accompany believers. This reference is brief and does not provide details about how the practice was to be implemented in worship. However, it confirms that tongues were understood to be a sign of divine empowerment.
3. **1 Corinthians 12:10**: In the same letter to the Corinthians, Paul lists speaking in tongues and the interpretation of tongues as spiritual gifts given by the Holy Spirit. This chapter is crucial because it highlights that tongues and their interpretation are distinct gifts. Not every believer who speaks in tongues will have the gift of interpretation, which is why Paul insists on the presence of someone with this gift in communal worship settings.

The Role of Tongues in Early Church Practices and How It Differs from Modern Interpretations

In the early church, speaking in tongues served as a sign of the Holy Spirit's presence and power, as seen in Acts 2 and 1 Corinthians 12. The Pentecost event

demonstrates tongues as a miraculous breaking of language barriers, enabling the apostles to proclaim the gospel to people from various nations. This use of tongues was a unifying force, bringing diverse peoples together under the message of Christ. It was an outward sign that confirmed the inclusivity of the Christian message.

In the Corinthian church, tongues were viewed as a spiritual gift that could be used for personal prayer or, with interpretation, for the edification of the congregation. Paul's emphasis in **1 Corinthians 14** suggests that the early church held tongues in high regard, but there was also a clear understanding that this gift needed to be regulated within the corporate worship setting. The goal of tongues was not to cause confusion or division but to contribute to the building up of the church when used appropriately.

In contrast, modern interpretations of speaking in tongues, especially in Pentecostal and Charismatic movements, often emphasize the personal and ecstatic nature of the experience. Tongues are frequently spoken during worship services without interpretation, functioning more as a personal expression of spirituality rather than a gift meant to edify the whole church. This shift away from the communal focus on edification toward an individualistic expression is one of the primary reasons why uninterpreted tongues in modern worship can be problematic. It tends to elevate personal spiritual experience over corporate understanding and unity, which contradicts the principles Paul laid out in **1 Corinthians 14**.

Moreover, the modern practice often diverges from the Pentecost event in **Acts 2**, where the miracle was that people heard the message of the gospel in their own languages, not in unintelligible speech. This difference highlights a growing tension between the early church's use of tongues as a unifying and communicative sign and the contemporary practice that sometimes prioritizes personal spiritual experience over collective edification.

Expanded Theological Implications of Uninterpreted Tongues

Exploring the Theological Purpose of Tongues: Edification of the Church Versus Personal Prayer

The New Testament presents speaking in tongues as a significant spiritual gift, but it is one with a clear theological purpose. According to **1 Corinthians 14**, this purpose can be understood in two primary ways: the edification of the individual through personal prayer and the edification of the church as a whole.

1. **Personal Edification (Prayer)**
    - Paul acknowledges that tongues can serve as a form of intimate, personal communication with God. In **1 Corinthians 14:2**, he states, *"For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to people but to God. Indeed, no one understands them; they utter mysteries by the Spirit."* In this sense, tongues serve a deeply spiritual function, allowing the individual to communicate with God in a way that transcends their understanding. This is why Paul goes on to say in **verse 4**, *"Anyone who speaks in a tongue edifies themselves."* The person praying in tongues may be spiritually uplifted and drawn closer to God through this mysterious form of communication, even if the meaning remains obscure to them.
    - However, this personal edification is intended to be a private matter. The use of tongues in personal prayer is distinct from its use in the congregational setting. When tongues are spoken in private prayer, the lack of interpretation is not problematic because it is a direct form of communication with God. The theological purpose here is personal spiritual growth and communion with God.
2. **Corporate Edification (Worship)**
    - In contrast, when tongues are spoken in a corporate worship setting, the goal should be the edification of the entire church body. Paul emphasizes this point repeatedly in **1 Corinthians 14:5, 12, and 26**. For instance, in **verse 12**, Paul urges the Corinthians to *"strive to excel in gifts that build up the church."* This focus on building up the church underscores Paul's understanding of spiritual gifts: they are

not given solely for individual benefit but for the good of the community.

- The use of tongues in corporate worship, therefore, must be accompanied by interpretation. This is because, without interpretation, the tongues are unintelligible to the congregation, and the potential for corporate edification is lost. Interpretation transforms the mysterious language of tongues into a message that can be understood, ensuring that the church as a whole is strengthened by the spiritual gift.

In sum, the theological purpose of tongues differs depending on the context. In private prayer, tongues can be a valuable tool for personal communion with God. In corporate worship, however, the primary goal should be the edification of the church, and this requires interpretation.

The Balance Between Individual Spiritual Expression and Corporate Edification

One of the key theological challenges posed by the practice of tongues is balancing individual spiritual expression with the collective needs of the congregation. In a church setting, worship is not merely an aggregation of individual spiritual experiences; it is a communal act of glorifying God and building up the body of Christ. This understanding of worship as a collective act is why Paul prioritizes intelligibility and order over ecstatic expressions of spirituality that might benefit only a few individuals.

Paul's concern, expressed in **1 Corinthians 14:19**, highlights this balance: *"But in the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue."* Here, Paul is not denying the value of tongues as a form of personal spiritual expression. Instead, he is advocating for a balance that places the needs of the community above individual experiences of spirituality. In a public worship setting, every act of spiritual expression should contribute to the collective worship and edification of the church.

This balance becomes skewed when tongues are spoken without interpretation. The individual may experience a profound sense of connection with God, but if that connection is not shared through interpretation, the rest of the congregation is left out. This can lead to a fragmentation of the worship experience, where

individual expressions take precedence over the unity of the church body. In this way, the practice of uninterpreted tongues can disrupt the balance that Paul advocates, where both individual spirituality and corporate edification are respected and upheld.

How Uninterpreted Tongues Can Cause Confusion and Disorder, Contrary to Paul's Teachings

Paul's instructions in **1 Corinthians 14** emphasize the importance of order and clarity in worship. He is particularly concerned with how tongues, when spoken without interpretation, can lead to confusion and disorder. In **verse 23**, Paul warns, *"So if the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues, and inquirers or unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are out of your mind?"* This rhetorical question highlights the potential for chaos and misunderstanding when tongues are spoken without interpretation.

1. **Confusion Among Congregants**
    - Uninterpreted tongues can create confusion not only for unbelievers or outsiders but also for regular members of the congregation. Worship is meant to be a time of spiritual enrichment and growth, but when large portions of the service are unintelligible, many congregants may feel disconnected or excluded from what is happening. Rather than feeling uplifted or spiritually nourished, they may feel confused or frustrated. The result is that the very purpose of worship—to encounter God as a community—is undermined.
2. **Disorder in Worship**
    - In addition to creating confusion, uninterpreted tongues can also lead to disorder in worship. Paul's teachings in **1 Corinthians 14** are framed by a concern for orderliness and decency in worship: *"For God is not a God of disorder but of peace"* (**verse 33**). Paul understands that worship should reflect the character of God, who brings peace and harmony, not chaos. By allowing tongues to be spoken without interpretation, churches risk fostering an environment where disorder reigns, which is contrary to the orderly worship that Paul envisions.

3. **Division Within the Church**
    - Finally, the practice of uninterpreted tongues has the potential to create divisions within the church. Those who possess the gift of tongues may be viewed as more spiritual or privileged, while those who do not speak in tongues—or who do not understand the practice—may feel marginalized or inferior. This dynamic can breed resentment and division within the congregation, further eroding the sense of unity and mutual edification that Paul seeks to cultivate. In **1 Corinthians 12**, Paul stresses the importance of the church as one body, with each member contributing to the whole. When tongues are spoken without interpretation, this sense of unity is fractured, as the worship experience becomes fragmented and exclusionary.

In light of these potential pitfalls, Paul's teachings provide a clear framework for the proper use of tongues in worship: interpretation must accompany tongues to ensure that the congregation is edified, that order is maintained, and that confusion and division are avoided.

Expanded Historical and Denominational Perspectives

A Brief History of How Different Christian Traditions Have Handled the Practice of Tongues

The practice of speaking in tongues, or glossolalia, has a varied history across Christian traditions. Although glossolalia is most strongly associated with Pentecostalism and Charismatic movements today, its roots extend back to the early church, with occasional occurrences throughout Christian history.

1. **Early Church and the Patristic Period**
    - The practice of speaking in tongues as described in **Acts 2** and **1 Corinthians 12-14** was present in the earliest Christian communities. The miraculous gift of speaking in other languages at Pentecost, allowing the apostles to proclaim the gospel to people of various linguistic backgrounds, was seen as a powerful manifestation of the Holy Spirit. In the early church, tongues were closely linked to the

prophetic and apostolic authority, and it is likely that they occurred sporadically as a sign of divine power, particularly in missionary contexts.

- However, after the apostolic age, reports of glossolalia became less frequent. Church Fathers such as Augustine and Chrysostom did not emphasize or encourage the practice, with Chrysostom even viewing tongues as a gift no longer necessary for the church. Augustine's writings reflect a similar perspective, interpreting tongues as a sign for the early church but not essential for Christian worship in his time.

2. **Reformation and Post-Reformation**

   - During the Reformation, the focus of most Protestant reformers was on recovering biblical doctrine and reforming church practices, with little attention given to ecstatic spiritual gifts such as tongues. The emphasis was on the authority of Scripture, justification by faith, and the centrality of the preached word. As a result, tongues were not considered a normative part of worship or Christian experience in most Reformation traditions, including Lutheranism, Calvinism, and Anglicanism.

   - However, there were isolated movements that practiced ecstatic gifts. Some Anabaptist groups in the 16th century, for example, engaged in charismatic expressions, including tongues, as part of their emphasis on the direct experience of the Holy Spirit. These movements, however, were often seen as radical and remained on the fringes of mainstream Protestantism.

3. **The Rise of Pentecostalism (Early 20th Century)**

   - The modern resurgence of speaking in tongues began with the Pentecostal movement in the early 20th century. The Pentecostal revival is often traced back to the Azusa Street Revival in Los Angeles in 1906, led by William J. Seymour. This revival was characterized by spontaneous outbursts of glossolalia, prophecy, healing, and other

miraculous gifts, which were seen as signs of a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit akin to the events of Pentecost.

- Pentecostals viewed tongues as both a personal prayer language and a public sign of spiritual empowerment. Theologically, Pentecostals generally believe that speaking in tongues is the initial evidence of the baptism in the Holy Spirit, a distinct experience following conversion. This belief set Pentecostalism apart from other Protestant traditions, which often viewed the baptism of the Holy Spirit as a non-charismatic experience, occurring at conversion.
- Pentecostalism quickly spread across the globe, creating denominations such as the Assemblies of God, the Church of God in Christ, and the Pentecostal Holiness Church. In these traditions, tongues became an accepted and often expected part of the worship experience, whether in private prayer or in public gatherings.

4. **The Charismatic Movement (1960s-1970s)**

- In the 1960s, the Charismatic movement emerged, bringing Pentecostal practices, including speaking in tongues, into mainstream Protestant and even Catholic churches. Unlike Pentecostalism, the Charismatic movement did not form new denominations but instead sought to renew existing denominations by encouraging the practice of spiritual gifts.
- Charismatic renewal spread across a wide range of Christian traditions, including Anglican, Lutheran, Presbyterian, and Roman Catholic churches. Charismatics emphasized personal encounters with the Holy Spirit, including speaking in tongues, prophecy, and healing, while remaining within the theological frameworks of their respective traditions.
- The movement led to greater acceptance of glossolalia in denominations that had previously been more reserved or skeptical about ecstatic spiritual gifts. However, the emphasis on interpretation of tongues remained less prominent than in early Pentecostalism, with many Charismatics treating tongues as a

personal prayer language rather than a public message requiring interpretation.

5. **Third Wave Movement (1980s-Present)**
    - In the 1980s, the so-called "Third Wave" movement, also known as the Neo-Charismatic movement, arose, influenced by the teachings of theologians such as John Wimber and C. Peter Wagner. This movement embraced the ongoing operation of spiritual gifts, including tongues, but often rejected the classical Pentecostal doctrine of tongues as the initial evidence of Spirit baptism.
    - In Third Wave churches, such as the Vineyard movement, the emphasis is placed on the broader experience of the Holy Spirit's power for ministry, without necessarily focusing on tongues as the primary sign of spiritual empowerment. While tongues are practiced, they are not as central to the theology as in Pentecostalism.

How Mainstream Denominations View the Practice of Uninterpreted Tongues

1. **Roman Catholicism**
    - Within the Roman Catholic Church, the practice of tongues gained renewed attention through the Charismatic Renewal movement beginning in the 1960s. While not traditionally part of Catholic liturgy, Charismatic Catholics have embraced glossolalia in personal prayer and small group worship settings. However, the official stance of the Catholic Church emphasizes that tongues should contribute to the building up of the church and that proper discernment and order are necessary when these gifts are manifested in communal worship. Uninterpreted tongues are generally not permitted in formal liturgical settings, as the church stresses the importance of intelligibility in corporate prayer and worship.
2. **Mainline Protestant Denominations**
    - **Lutheranism, Presbyterianism, and Anglicanism**: These traditions have historically been skeptical of speaking in tongues, viewing it as either unnecessary for worship or even disruptive. Mainline

Protestantism places a strong emphasis on the preached word, liturgy, and sacraments as the primary means of encountering God. While some congregations within these denominations have been influenced by the Charismatic movement, uninterpreted tongues are generally not practiced in worship services. Many mainline churches adhere to Paul's teachings in **1 Corinthians 14**, requiring that tongues be interpreted to ensure the edification of the congregation.

- **Methodism**: Methodists, particularly within the more traditional branches, have a similar view to other mainline Protestants. The emphasis is placed on order, scripture, and the sanctified life rather than charismatic expressions. However, some Methodist congregations influenced by the Charismatic movement do practice tongues, though typically with an expectation of interpretation in corporate settings.

3. **Evangelicalism**

   - Evangelicalism is a broad tradition with varying perspectives on tongues. Many Evangelical denominations, such as the Southern Baptist Convention and the Evangelical Free Church, have traditionally been cessationist—believing that the miraculous gifts of the Spirit, including tongues, ceased with the apostolic age. These denominations typically discourage or outright prohibit the practice of tongues, especially without interpretation, viewing it as inconsistent with orderly worship.
   - However, there are Evangelical groups that embrace charismatic expressions, including tongues, within their congregations. In such settings, the expectation of interpretation may be less strictly enforced, leading to the same theological tensions seen in Pentecostal and Charismatic churches regarding uninterpreted tongues.

4. **Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches**

   - As discussed earlier, in most Pentecostal and Charismatic churches, speaking in tongues is a normative part of worship. While many of

these churches formally recognize the need for interpretation, especially in public settings, the actual practice often varies. In some congregations, tongues are spoken freely without interpretation, especially during times of personal prayer or communal worship, with the understanding that the individual is speaking directly to God rather than delivering a message to the congregation.

- However, some Pentecostal denominations, such as the Assemblies of God, have made efforts to ensure that tongues are accompanied by interpretation in public worship services, in accordance with Paul's teaching in **1 Corinthians 14**.

The Impact on Worship

Case Studies and Examples from Churches (Including Your Own Experience)

The practice of speaking in tongues without interpretation is not merely a theological or doctrinal issue but one that has a profound impact on the dynamics of worship in contemporary churches. To understand this impact, we can examine a few case studies and examples that reflect how uninterpreted tongues affect worship environments. These case studies draw from both Pentecostal/Charismatic contexts as well as from your own experiences.

1. **Case Study 1: A Large Pentecostal Church**

    - In a prominent Pentecostal church, the practice of speaking in tongues is woven into the fabric of worship services. During the praise and worship segment, congregants are often encouraged to "speak in the Spirit," which results in many members simultaneously praying aloud in tongues. This practice is seen as a collective expression of spirituality, where congregants are free to engage in direct communication with God without the constraints of interpretation. However, this often creates a cacophony of voices that can be disorienting to newcomers or those unfamiliar with the practice. While long-time members may find it spiritually uplifting, the lack of intelligibility can leave others feeling lost or disconnected, undermining the inclusivity of the worship experience.

2. **Case Study 2: A Small Charismatic Congregation**
    - In a smaller Charismatic congregation, speaking in tongues occurs during moments of quiet reflection or after a sermon. In this setting, tongues are spoken by a few individuals, but there is rarely any interpretation. The church leadership explains that these moments are personal encounters with the Holy Spirit and do not require interpretation. Over time, however, some congregants begin to feel uncomfortable with the practice. Those who do not speak in tongues often feel excluded, as if they are missing out on a vital aspect of worship. Despite being part of the church community for years, these individuals report feeling spiritually inferior or alienated, leading to a gradual decline in their participation and, in some cases, their decision to leave the church altogether.
3. **Your Own Experience**
    - You have expressed concern about your church's practice of allowing uninterpreted tongues during worship. In your experience, this practice has a noticeable impact on the cohesion and unity of the congregation. When individuals speak in tongues without interpretation, it creates an atmosphere of confusion, particularly for those who are not accustomed to or comfortable with the practice. Instead of contributing to the spiritual growth of the church, the practice of uninterpreted tongues can become a source of distraction or even frustration for some congregants. The lack of clarity and understanding in these moments detracts from the shared experience of worship, causing a rift between those who engage in the practice and those who do not. As a result, you have found yourself questioning the effectiveness and appropriateness of this practice in a corporate worship setting.

The Effect of Uninterpreted Tongues on Congregational Unity, Understanding, and Spiritual Growth

The effects of uninterpreted tongues on worship are varied, but one of the most significant concerns is how it impacts congregational unity. Worship is intended to bring believers together in a shared encounter with God, fostering a sense of

community, mutual edification, and collective spiritual growth. When tongues are spoken without interpretation, however, several negative effects can arise:

1. **Fragmentation of the Worship Experience**
    - Uninterpreted tongues can lead to a fragmentation of the worship experience, where certain individuals or groups within the congregation participate in a practice that others do not understand or cannot engage in. This creates a divide within the church, as those who speak in tongues may feel spiritually superior, while those who do not may feel left out or marginalized. Instead of building up the body of Christ as Paul instructs in **1 Corinthians 14**, uninterpreted tongues can cause the congregation to splinter into different factions based on their spiritual practices.
2. **Confusion and Lack of Understanding**
    - Another significant effect of uninterpreted tongues is the confusion it can cause among congregants. Paul addresses this concern directly in **1 Corinthians 14:23**, warning that if outsiders or unbelievers enter the church and hear everyone speaking in tongues without interpretation, they will think the church is out of its mind. This warning is not limited to outsiders; even regular church members can experience confusion when tongues are spoken without any accompanying interpretation. The lack of understanding can make it difficult for congregants to connect with the message of the service or to feel that they are participating fully in worship. Over time, this confusion can erode the sense of community and shared purpose that worship is meant to cultivate.
3. **Impediments to Spiritual Growth**
    - Spiritual growth within a congregation relies on teaching, edification, and the collective encouragement of one another. When tongues are spoken without interpretation, it can hinder this growth by preventing meaningful communication and mutual understanding. The very purpose of spiritual gifts, as Paul outlines in **1 Corinthians 12-14**, is to build up the church. If tongues are used in a way that

excludes others or creates confusion, they fail to fulfill their intended role. Instead of promoting spiritual maturity and unity, uninterpreted tongues can become a stumbling block, preventing members from fully engaging with the spiritual content of the service and impeding their personal growth in Christ.

The Potential for Exclusion or Alienation of Congregants Who Cannot Participate in or Understand the Practice

The practice of uninterpreted tongues can also have a profound impact on the inclusivity of worship, potentially leading to the exclusion or alienation of congregants who do not share in the experience. This is especially relevant for new believers, visitors, or individuals from more traditional church backgrounds who may be unfamiliar or uncomfortable with the practice of speaking in tongues.

1. **Exclusion of Non-Participants**
    - In many churches that embrace the practice of tongues, there is an unspoken expectation that those who are spiritually mature will eventually manifest the gift of tongues. For congregants who do not speak in tongues, this expectation can create a sense of inadequacy or exclusion. They may feel that they are not as spiritually advanced as those who do, leading to feelings of inferiority. Over time, these feelings can cause non-participants to withdraw from the community, either by physically distancing themselves during worship or by mentally disengaging from the service. This exclusion undermines the very purpose of worship, which is to draw all believers closer to God in unity.
2. **Alienation of Newcomers and Outsiders**
    - For newcomers or outsiders visiting a church where tongues are spoken without interpretation, the practice can be bewildering and alienating. Without an explanation or interpretation, tongues may appear chaotic, confusing, or even intimidating. Instead of feeling welcomed into the church community, visitors may feel like outsiders who do not belong. Paul's concern in **1 Corinthians 14** that outsiders might think the congregation is "out of its mind" is particularly

relevant here. Uninterpreted tongues can create an environment where visitors or new believers feel out of place, preventing them from fully participating in the worship experience and potentially discouraging them from returning to the church.

3. **Cultural and Linguistic Barriers**
    - In some multicultural congregations, uninterpreted tongues can also create additional cultural or linguistic barriers. For congregants from different linguistic or cultural backgrounds, worship services already present challenges in terms of language and cultural expression. When tongues are spoken without interpretation, it can exacerbate these barriers, making worship even less accessible to those who are already struggling to feel connected. This can further alienate individuals from the worship experience and prevent them from fully integrating into the church community.
4. **Spiritual Discouragement**
    - Finally, the practice of uninterpreted tongues can lead to spiritual discouragement for those who feel excluded or alienated. Worship is meant to be a time of spiritual renewal and growth, but when congregants are left out of the experience due to unintelligible speech, they may feel discouraged in their faith. Instead of feeling uplifted or strengthened in their walk with Christ, they may feel distant from God and disconnected from the church community. This spiritual discouragement can have long-lasting effects, potentially leading individuals to question their place in the church or even in the faith itself.

A Call for Reform: Returning to Biblical Principles

Reaffirming the Need for Interpretation in Worship Services

The biblical mandate for the use of spiritual gifts, particularly speaking in tongues, is clear: these gifts are given by the Holy Spirit not for the benefit of the individual

alone, but for the edification of the entire church. As **1 Corinthians 14:27-28** lays out, if someone speaks in a tongue during a worship service, they must be accompanied by an interpreter so that the congregation can understand and be built up by the message. This principle stems from the broader biblical teaching that worship is meant to be a collective act of unity and mutual edification, rather than a display of individual spirituality.

The need for interpretation, therefore, is not simply a matter of practicality or order but a matter of theological integrity. When tongues are spoken without interpretation, the church is deprived of the full potential of that spiritual gift. Instead of fostering unity and understanding, uninterpreted tongues create confusion, division, and alienation, undermining the very purpose of worship. By reaffirming the biblical principles laid out in **1 Corinthians 14**, churches can reclaim a more holistic and edifying use of spiritual gifts that honors both individual expressions of faith and the communal experience of worship.

Churches should prioritize biblical teaching that emphasizes intelligibility and corporate edification. The focus must shift from allowing tongues as an uncontrolled, spontaneous expression to ensuring that this gift is used in a way that benefits the whole congregation. This doesn't mean suppressing the gift of tongues but aligning its use with the purpose of worship as outlined in Scripture: to bring all members of the body of Christ into a deeper relationship with God and one another.

Suggestions for Churches to Ensure that Spiritual Gifts, Including Tongues, Are Used in Ways that Edify the Entire Congregation

1. **Education and Teaching on Spiritual Gifts**
    - One of the key steps churches can take to ensure that spiritual gifts are used biblically is to offer regular teaching and education on the purpose and use of these gifts. Sermons, Bible studies, and small group discussions should be dedicated to explaining the biblical guidelines for spiritual gifts, including tongues. This teaching should emphasize the need for interpretation in corporate settings, drawing directly from **1 Corinthians 14**. By helping congregants understand the biblical context for spiritual gifts, churches can create a culture

where tongues are used in a way that enhances worship rather than detracts from it.

- Churches can also provide instruction on the nature of the gift of interpretation and how individuals can discern whether they have this gift. Often, there may be individuals within the congregation who possess the gift of interpretation but have not recognized or developed it. Encouraging the discovery and use of this gift can help ensure that when tongues are spoken, they are accompanied by interpretation that benefits the entire church.

2. **Establishing Clear Guidelines for the Use of Tongues in Worship**

   - To create a more orderly worship environment, churches should establish clear guidelines for the use of tongues during services. These guidelines could include limiting the number of people who speak in tongues at a given time, as Paul instructs in **1 Corinthians 14:27**, and ensuring that there is always someone present who has the gift of interpretation. If no interpreter is available, the speaker should be encouraged to keep their tongues expression private, as **1 Corinthians 14:28** instructs.

   - Churches could also designate specific times during the service for the use of tongues and interpretation. For example, there could be a designated moment during prayer or after the sermon where those who feel led to speak in tongues may do so, but only if there is someone ready to interpret. By structuring the service in this way, churches can preserve spontaneity while maintaining order and intelligibility.

3. **Promoting Other Gifts of the Spirit Alongside Tongues**

   - While tongues often receive a great deal of attention in Pentecostal and Charismatic churches, it is important to emphasize that tongues are just one of many spiritual gifts given to the church. In **1 Corinthians 12**, Paul lists a variety of gifts, including prophecy, wisdom, knowledge, and healing. Churches should actively promote the exercise of these other gifts alongside tongues, helping

congregants see that all gifts are valuable and necessary for the building up of the body of Christ.

- By broadening the focus beyond tongues, churches can create a more balanced worship experience where a diversity of gifts is celebrated and utilized. This approach can also alleviate some of the pressure that individuals may feel to speak in tongues, especially if they are struggling to do so. Encouraging the exercise of other gifts can help create a more inclusive environment where all members feel that their spiritual contributions are valued.

4. **Creating Spaces for Personal Spiritual Expression Outside of Corporate Worship**

    - In addition to structuring the use of tongues during worship services, churches can create spaces outside of the main service for more personal expressions of spirituality. This could include prayer meetings, small groups, or special Charismatic services where individuals are free to speak in tongues and exercise other spiritual gifts without the need for interpretation. These settings provide an opportunity for personal spiritual growth and edification while preserving the order and intelligibility of the main corporate worship service.

    - By offering these alternative spaces, churches can strike a balance between encouraging personal spiritual expression and maintaining the biblical standards for corporate worship. This also helps to create a more welcoming and accessible environment for visitors and new believers who may not be familiar with charismatic practices.

How Church Leadership Can Encourage a More Biblically Sound Practice Without Discouraging Spiritual Expression

Church leaders have a critical role in guiding their congregations toward a more biblically sound practice of spiritual gifts without quenching the Spirit or discouraging individual expression. The key is to foster an environment where spiritual gifts are used in a way that is both orderly and edifying.

1. **Modeling Biblical Practice in Leadership**
    - Pastors and church leaders should model the biblical approach to spiritual gifts in their own conduct and leadership. This includes being transparent about their understanding of tongues and interpretation, teaching on these subjects from the pulpit, and setting an example by ensuring that any public expression of tongues is accompanied by interpretation. When leaders model this behavior, it sets a tone for the entire congregation and helps establish a culture of order and clarity in worship.
2. **Encouraging Openness and Dialogue**
    - Leaders should foster an open dialogue about the use of spiritual gifts in the church. This can be done through forums, Q&A sessions, or small group discussions where congregants can express their concerns, ask questions, and receive guidance on how to exercise their gifts biblically. By creating a space for conversation, leaders can address misconceptions and fears around spiritual gifts while providing clear biblical teaching on their use.
    - Church leadership should also be approachable and willing to listen to those who may feel excluded or uncomfortable with the practice of uninterpreted tongues. Addressing these concerns with empathy and understanding can help prevent division within the church and ensure that all members feel valued and included.
3. **Creating a Balanced Worship Experience**
    - Leaders can work with worship teams and other church staff to design services that reflect a balance between spiritual expression and corporate edification. This might involve incorporating more teaching moments into the service, providing context for the use of spiritual gifts, or intentionally creating moments for reflection and interpretation. Leaders should aim to create a worship experience that is accessible to all members of the congregation, whether they speak in tongues or not.

4. **Training and Mentoring in Spiritual Gifts**
    - Leaders should also be proactive in offering training and mentorship for those who are seeking to understand and develop their spiritual gifts. This could include workshops on the discernment of spiritual gifts, as well as mentorship programs where more experienced believers guide others in how to exercise their gifts appropriately. Training on the gift of interpretation, in particular, should be a focus, as it is often underdeveloped in churches that emphasize tongues.
    - By investing in the spiritual development of their congregation, leaders can encourage the responsible use of spiritual gifts while ensuring that these gifts are exercised in a way that benefits the entire church.
5. **Affirming the Role of the Holy Spirit**
    - Finally, church leadership should affirm the ongoing role of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church while also emphasizing the importance of biblical order and clarity. It is important to remind congregants that the Spirit's work is not limited to ecstatic expressions like tongues but is also manifest in prophecy, teaching, service, and many other ways. By affirming the broad scope of the Spirit's work, leaders can encourage a healthy and holistic approach to spiritual gifts that honors both individual expression and corporate edification.

Expanded Conclusion

Recap of the Biblical Teaching on Tongues and Interpretation

In examining the biblical teaching on speaking in tongues and interpretation, we return to the foundational passages in **1 Corinthians 12-14**, where Paul addresses the use of spiritual gifts within the context of corporate worship. Paul's instruction is clear: tongues are a legitimate and valuable gift of the Holy Spirit, but their use must be regulated in a way that benefits the entire church community. In **1 Corinthians 14:27-28**, Paul sets forth the requirement that tongues spoken during worship must be interpreted, so that the church may be

edified. If no interpreter is present, the speaker is instructed to remain silent and speak to God privately.

Paul's concern is not to suppress spiritual expression but to ensure that worship remains a collective experience, where every member of the congregation can understand and be built up in faith. He emphasizes that spiritual gifts, including tongues, should always contribute to the edification of the church body, fostering unity, understanding, and spiritual growth. The absence of interpretation, however, disrupts this goal, leading to confusion and division rather than edification and peace. Paul's teaching challenges us to balance personal spiritual experiences with the needs of the wider congregation, ensuring that worship is both Spirit-led and orderly.

Throughout the New Testament, we also see tongues functioning in different capacities—whether as a miraculous sign of the Spirit's outpouring, as seen in **Acts 2**, or as a personal prayer language, as referenced in **1 Corinthians 14:2**. In all these cases, the purpose remains the same: to glorify God and build up the church. Tongues are not meant to be a source of confusion or division but a means of drawing believers closer to God and to one another.

Final Thoughts on Fostering Both Spiritual Expression and Order in Church Worship

The challenge that many churches face today is finding a way to embrace the full spectrum of spiritual gifts while maintaining the biblical principles of order and mutual edification in worship. The spontaneous and often ecstatic nature of gifts like tongues can be powerful, but without proper guidance and interpretation, they can lead to confusion and alienation within the congregation. The solution is not to suppress spiritual expression but to channel it in ways that align with Scripture and serve the greater good of the church community.

Fostering an environment where both spiritual expression and order coexist requires intentional effort from church leadership and congregants alike. Leaders must provide clear teaching on the biblical guidelines for spiritual gifts, emphasizing the need for interpretation and the importance of edifying the entire body of believers. By creating structured opportunities for the exercise of gifts like tongues and ensuring that interpretation is present when needed, leaders can help maintain a balance between personal spirituality and corporate worship.

Moreover, churches can encourage a culture of inclusivity, where all spiritual gifts are valued and celebrated. By promoting a diversity of gifts and ensuring that worship remains accessible to all members—whether they speak in tongues or not—churches can foster a stronger sense of unity and shared purpose. This approach allows for vibrant, Spirit-led worship that builds up the entire body of Christ, reflecting the biblical vision of a church that is both dynamic and ordered.

In conclusion, the practice of speaking in tongues is a profound expression of the Holy Spirit's work in the life of the believer and the church. However, as Paul reminds us, this gift must be exercised with discernment, wisdom, and a commitment to the edification of the entire church body. By returning to the biblical principles of interpretation and order in worship, churches can create a worship experience that honors the Spirit's work while ensuring that all members are included, understood, and built up in their faith. This balance of spiritual expression and order is not only possible but essential for the health and vitality of the church in fulfilling its mission to glorify God and make disciples of all nations.

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